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22 January 1954

TO: Acting Deputy Director (Administration)

SUBJECT: Improving the Writing Ability of Agency Personnel
Through Published Guides

1. PROBLEM:

To improve the writing ability and correspondence techniques of Agency personnel.

2. ASSUMPTION:

That the Agency desires to improve the abilities of its people whenever possible, provided the cost and time required is reasonable.

3. FACTS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM:

- a. Our writings are substandard. (Appendices A and B)
- b. Our writing weaknesses cannot be readily recognized or corrected. We have neither standards for evaluating our writing, nor guides to improve it.
- c. The value of published guides is recognized by many Federal agencies. (Appendices C, D, E, and F)
- d. Our people have expressed a desire for similar guides. (Appendix A)
- e. Improving the quality of Agency writings is a phase of the Correspondence Management Program. (Appendix G)
- f. The cost in staff salaries to develop the proposed guides cannot be isolated from total salary expenses of the Correspondence Management Program. Facets of the Program are interrelated. Developing one produces material for another. The cost of printing and issuing material, however, will be approximately \$800 the first year, and \$300 each year thereafter.

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- g. The guides will be developed by Mr. [REDACTED] and Mrs. Helen [REDACTED] of the General Services Office. Their experience and educational backgrounds fully qualify them for the task.

4. DISCUSSION:

- a. The writing standards of only ten years ago are outdated. "Gobbledygook," "Federalese," excess verbiage, and flowery phrases are out of place. They conflict with modern business practices.

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Streamlining is now the order. However, many of our people have not awakened to it. We see examples of this every day--in regulations, correspondence, reports, staff studies, and other writings. An awakening is needed!

b. It might be asked, "Why not use the material of other agencies; their publications seem to be excellent?" We agree, the majority are! However, they do not bring the problem home. They do not, and cannot, show by example where in particular the writings of this Agency are often below modern standards. We can point out our needs convincingly only by illustrating specific Agency deficiencies.

c. In correspondence management, one does not consider the techniques of effective writing apart from other facets of the program. Appendix G is a brief on our Correspondence Management Program. The underscored and starred passages represent aspects of correspondence management dealing with the improvement of writing techniques. Removing these would leave a great void in what we consider a well-rounded effective program.

d. We have found examples of grammatical errors in Agency writings. However, these are not our major concern. We are striving for streamlined readable writing. Aids to grammatically correct writing are well provided for in the proposed Stenographer's and Typist's Guide being developed by the Office of Training. Our proposed guides therefore will not contain material on grammar, punctuation, capitalization, underlining, and other similar fundamentals.

e. We propose to release text material on a well-planned basis in a series of unclassified informational sheets. Interest will be aroused through the use of fliers and posters. Each of these will also carry a positive message for improving our writing or streamlining correspondence. Issuances will be punched for loose-leaf binding; a cover will be provided with the first release. We feel that this method will encourage recipients to assemble the guides into complete manuals. We further believe that the series method will ensure continuing interest and will appeal to those who are reluctant to peruse a single voluminous text.

f. Development of the proposed guides will be coordinated with the Office of Training.

5. CONCLUSION:

That the Agency will benefit materially by providing its employees with guides to effective writing. The program is needed and desired. Its cost should be recouped many times over through the improved quality of Agency writings, and the general improvement of CIA personnel.

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6. ACTION RECOMMENDED:

That the Chief, General Services Office, be authorized to develop the writing guides described in this paper.

/s/

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Chief, General Services Office

ANNEXES:

- Appendix A. Headquarters-wide poll to determine the Agency's Needs for Published Guides on the Techniques of Writing.
- Appendix B. Extracts from Agency Writings.
- Appendix C. "Getting Your Ideas Across Through Writing."
- Appendix D. "Cable-de-Cook or Plain Talk?"
- Appendix E. "Management Program for Streamlining Correspondence."
- Appendix F. "Effective Letters."
- Appendix G. "Your Correspondence Management Program--Its Aims and How Accomplished."

CONCURRENCE:

/s/

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Director of Training

Action by Approving Authority:

Approved:

Date:

L. K. WHITE
Acting Deputy Director
(Administration)

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Headquarters-Wide Poll to Determine the Agency's Needs for Published Guides on the Techniques of Writing

1. Personnel of fourteen different offices, representing a cross-section of Agency levels and functions, were polled during this survey. The following summarizes their opinions:

Question: How would you rate Agency correspondence and other writing productions as to quality - E, VG, G, F, P?

Opinions:	<u>Quality</u>	<u>Number</u>
	Between "Very Good" and "Good"	2
	"Good"	3
	Between "Good" and "Fair"	5
	"Fair"	2
	Between "Fair" and "Poor"	1
	"Could be improved"	1

The need for quality improvement was expressed or implied by each person polled.

Question: Which method would most effectively improve the quality of Agency writings?

- a. The issuance of literature on the subject?
- b. A formal training program?

Opinions:	<u>Method</u>	<u>Number</u>
	Issuance of Literature	8
	Training Program	2
	Combination of Both	2
	No Definite Opinion	2

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A majority agreed that few people retain all the information imparted to them during formal training courses. From this consensus it is concluded that the value of reference material is universally recognized.

Question: How would you like to have such material furnished--in a series of pamphlets adaptable to a looseleaf binder, or in complete book form?

Opinions: The issuance of material in a series of pamphlets is the unanimous preference.

Question: Do you feel that your office would benefit from a survey designed to streamline and reduce correspondence?

Opinions:	<u>Number</u>
Yes	8
No	2
Not Applicable	4

2. This summary is substantiated by the polling sheets on file in the General Services Office.

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APPENDIX A

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AD TACTIC STATE AGENCY - RICHMOND

LET'S PRUNE OUR CORRESPONDENCE!

It may be hard to believe but the following extracts are from our pattern letters used repeatedly:

"In view of the fact that I am yet unable to report any decision in connection with your application for employment with the Central Intelligence Agency, I do want you to know once more that the interest we retain in your qualifications is an active one."

Isn't this better?

Your application for employment in this Agency is still being considered. When decision is made we will notify you promptly.

Here's what we eliminated:

25 words
38 syllables
3 two syllable words
1 three syllable word
2 four syllable words
4 prepositional phrases

Consider this one!

"Should there be any radical change in your personal plans regarding your interest in this Agency, or should you have any questions regarding the particulars in your case, I want to invite you to communicate with me by letter at your convenience."

Isn't this clearer?

If you have any questions or if any personal change should affect your interest in your application, please write us.

Our pruning eliminated:

21 words
34 syllables
5 three syllable words
3 four syllable words
5 prepositional phrases

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A final example:

"In view of the circumstances in your letter, we can realize that you are in no position to consider employment at this time. However, we do wish to suggest that you get in touch with us again in the event you become interested in a position here at any time in the future."

Isn't this sharper?

We realize you cannot accept a position with us now. If conditions change so that you will wish to reconsider, we will be pleased to hear from you.

Modern times call for new styles in writing. Don't you admit that these examples prove that money and time can be saved--that our readers will grasp what we are saying more easily and they will need less time to read our writings?

CAN OUR REGULATIONS BE IMPROVED?

Let's modernize some of our latest regulatory writing. This calls for streamlining--that is, we will shorten our words, sentences, and paragraphs. We will get rid of governmental jargon. We will keep our words of three or more syllables to a minimum, our sentences to an average length of seventeen to twenty-one words, and cut down on the use of prepositions. Here are some examples:

"For this reason, every employee of the Organization whose duties involve the obligation and expenditure of confidential funds should not only understand the regulations governing their obligation and expenditure, but the underlying philosophies as well."

Let's see how we can improve it!

Every Agency employee whose duties authorize him to handle confidential funds should understand applicable regulations and all basic principles.

Here's what happened: We cut the original sentence from 35 to 19 words and from 75 to 43 syllables. Because of the nature of the subject we cannot eliminate all long words. But we have cut eight of the four syllable words to four, and eliminated one five syllable word. Do you think the revision is more readable, that you spent less time reading it, and possibly you will remember it longer?

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Let's look at another one!

"Delegation of authority for particular actions to levels considered to provide the degree of discretionary judgment commensurate with the magnitude or significance of the acts involved."

This appeared as an entire paragraph. Can't it difficult to understand? Aren't they trying to say that certain tasks will be assigned to personnel who are qualified to handle them? Doesn't the use of "levels" here sound as though they are speaking down to others?

Can't we sift this one?

"The Organization regulatory system provides the vehicle for the expression of policies and procedures essential to the performance of the Organization mission. It encompasses and delineates the functions of all components of the Organization individually and collectively with the objective of establishing singleness of purpose and efficiency and continuity of operational and administrative activities."

Here is one possible revision:

The Organization regulatory system expresses policies and procedures essential to our mission. It describes the functions of all Organization components to establish a single aim and promote continuity and efficiency in operational and administrative activities.

Or:

The Organization's policies and procedures are issued in its regulations. These regulations cover and describe all Organizational divisions. Their aim is for efficiency and unity in operational and administrative activities.

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT ONE REPORT

Sometimes long words are necessary in reports. Sentences can be kept within bounds, however, and the meaning can be clear. Here is a good example from one of our reports:

"Consultations with appropriate personnel toward the solving of procurement and external clearance bottlenecks is continued."

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Pat--

doesn't this one stall you a bit?

"Here was tentative agreement to adapt the Agency filing system but the recommendations provided for waiting until the material of all divisions could be reviewed in order that the manual could be adopted for the entire Office rather than this one division."

Can't we convey the same thought in a more understandable and readable way? For example:

It was agreed that our filing system could be adapted office wide. However, material from all divisions must be reviewed before this can be done.

Here is something more interesting than a crossword puzzle. Can you reduce these expressions to simple language? They were taken from our reports.

"...fall under heavy obligation..."

"The sense of the group seemed to be that in part this was possible."

"...such wasted effort would not obtain owing to..."

"...is dependent upon economic research in greater depth..."

"...and the Agency will have an exchange of views in order to obtain..."

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YOUR CORRESPONDENCE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM--
its aims and how accomplished

1. What is correspondence management?

It is a streamlining process employing the techniques of effective writing and the use of form and pattern correspondence. The results: better correspondence prepared by speedier, simpler and more economical means.

2. How can results be achieved?

a. By adhering to the approved procedures and style standards set forth in our Correspondence Handbook.

* b. By striving to write more effectively. Shorten words, sentences, and paragraphs. Eliminate nonessential prepositional phrases. Apply the four S's to your writing: Simplicity, Sincerity, Shortness, and Strength. Avoid using overworked bureaucratic jargon and cliches; strive for clear-cut, snappy sentences.

c. By using form letters, pattern correspondence, and other writing short cuts whenever possible.

3. What is our approach?

First, it will be necessary to determine certain facts about your Office's correspondence. What percentage is dictated or drafted? How much is repetitive, subject wise? What percentage, upon review, is returned for rewrite? To what extent is it below average in quality? What percentage of formal correspondence could be replaced by informal notes or discussion? Are unnecessary copies being prepared?

These questions are answered by analyzing samples of correspondence collected over a normal period of operation (preferably 60 days). Samples can be provided simply by having typists prepare an extra copy of each piece of correspondence typed during the sampling period.

From analyses of these samples we can develop form letters, pattern correspondence, and other writing short cuts. We can also determine our writing weaknesses and how best to correct them. To accomplish this you will be provided with written guides and personal assistance from the Records Management Staff, General Services Office.

Promoting and managing this program is a continuing process of reviewing existing correspondence practices, developing new techniques, and providing your people with service and guidance.